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SUBJECT: CHILE: Progressive Political Leader Hopes for Obama-Style
Renewal

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Claudio Orrego, the popular and recently re-elected mayor of one of the Santiago area's most diverse communities, told the Ambassador Nov. 25 that Chile is still looking for "the spirit of Obama" and needs to mobilize a new generation of voters. Orrego expressed disappointment that Chile's potential presidential candidates -- Sebastian Pinera, Jose Miguel Insulza, Eduardo Frei, and Ricardo Lagos, among others - all represent the "old guard" of Chilean politics rather than fresh ideas. Orrego also described his efforts to improve living conditions in his very diverse community through public-private partnerships, additional low-income housing, and supporting employment. Orrego, a Harvard-educated member of the Christian Democrats, is seen as one of the leading lights of his party, having significantly increased his votes in a year in which the Christian Democrats as a whole did poorly. End summary.

"The Spirit of Obama Has Yet to Reach Chile"

¶2. (SBU) On November 25 Ambassador Simons, accompanied by Poloff and E/Pol Specialist, called on Mayor of Penalolen Claudio Orrego. Orrego, a rising political star within progressive circles, spoke at length of his impressions of the recent U.S. elections. He was clearly well-informed and extremely interested, especially in the different internet and grassroots campaign strategies deployed. He lamented that the same spirit of grassroots mobilization and change, "the spirit of Obama," has not reached Chile and that the younger generation of politicians is not given the space to participate.

¶3. (SBU) Orrego illustrated his point, looking no further than his own party, the DC, which will most likely put forth a former president, Senator Eduardo Frei, as their 2009 presidential candidate. This could possibly replicate the Concertacion primary held in 1993 between Eduardo Frei (who won and went on to become president in 1994) and Ricardo Lagos (who lost but went on to become president in 2000). Orrego asked rhetorically how one can renew politics, which has lost prestige and legitimacy among citizens and especially young people, by turning to the past? He pointed out the difficulty of change when elderly former presidents, like Patricio Aylwin, who just turned 90-years old last week, are still giving front-page opinions, and perhaps setting direction, for current party politics. Orrego stated that, in his party, "you can get your head cut off" for promoting new ideas and change.

¶4. (SBU) Orrego stated that Chile desperately needs the younger generation of its politicians -- who, he insisted, are neither so young nor so inexperienced -- to be involved in national politics. However, he does not see an opening for them, across political parties, anytime soon. (Note: In a separate presentation to an international women's group on November 26, former Minister of Economy and fellow DC Alejandro Ferreiro echoed Orrego's concerns about the need for generational renewal in Chilean politics. When asked by E/Pol specialist if the Concertacion would be able to generate such renewal if it wins another term in office, Ferreiro responded with a clear "no," and went on to say that he thinks that only taking a turn out of power will shake the Concertacion into seriously re-thinking its mission. End note.)

¶5. (SBU) Orrego mentioned electoral reform -- particularly the implementation of automatic registration and voluntary voting -- as

an interest of his. (Note: Chile currently has voluntary registration and mandatory voting, with rates of registration of 18 - 35 year olds at extremely low levels. A registered voter that does not participate in an election can be fined. End note.) According to the Mayor, there is a great deal of fear among politicians about changing the electoral registration system. Registered voters may be aging, but they are a known quantity, and politicians inevitably work for those who vote and fear any change that might bring unknown variables into their electoral equations. Orrego argues that bringing in automatic registration and voluntary voting could really "oxygenize" Chilean politics and stated that he would be involved in promoting electoral reform.

A Popular Mayor of a Populous Urban Community

¶16. (U) Orrego (41) was re-elected in October's municipal elections with a ten-percent increase in votes compared to his first election in 2004. This is a considerable achievement in an electoral cycle where his coalition, the Concertacion, lost 59 mayoral seats and his party, the DC, dropped from winning 21 percent in 2004 to just under 14 percent of council member seats nationwide. The total number of registered voters actually increased in Penalolen at a time when politicians and policy-makers are wringing their hands over Chile's aging and diminishing voting population. Orrego, who received a Master's degree in Public Policy from Harvard's Kennedy School, is seen as one of the up-and-coming young Concertacion politicians. He served in government, including as Minister of Housing under former President Ricardo Lagos, before going into municipal politics.

¶17. (U) Orrego's community of Penalolen, located in the Andean foothills in eastern Santiago, is the eleventh most populous municipality in the country and growing, with roughly 240,000 inhabitants. Unlike other municipalities of the Santiago Metropolitan Region, it is very diverse in terms of socioeconomic status, with wealthy suburban developments located across the street from older neighborhoods that were originally squatter settlements.

¶18. (U) One of Orrego's goals has been the elimination of squatter settlements: according to the Mayor there are still 300 families waiting to be relocated into low-income housing projects. Orrego is quick to note that, despite the eradication of traditional squatter settlements, poor families still live as large groups of "allegados," extended family that live in or add onto a main house because they cannot afford to live elsewhere. He emphasized that the "easy work" of developing the municipality - paving roads, getting people on the electric and sanitary grid, building schools - is mostly done and now they are faced with the more difficult challenges of preventing teenage pregnancy and drug-use and dealing with obesity and other public health risks.

¶19. (U) Orrego explained that his philosophy for working to bring people out of poverty is based on the idea that the State alone cannot do anything about people's poverty. The municipality has programs that are designed to empower individuals to find ways to help themselves.

¶110. (U) One example of the programs Orrego is pushing is aimed at "cartoneros" -- informal sector workers who traditionally traveled around the community on bike-carts looking for cardboard and other materials being thrown away -- who are now organized into an association of recyclers under the auspices of the municipality. Another program promotes citizen participation and organization in the recovery of public spaces. Orrego underlined that this model sends the message that those who work hard can do well. The Mayor emphasized that, of course, they then have to be able to do well based on hard work and merit or the message of self-sufficiency is distorted.

¶111. (U) Orrego has also developed successful public-private partnerships, including with Microsoft, Cisco Systems and Intel. He is known for his longtime promotion of "digital government," and stand-alone free internet kiosks are visible around the municipality. Penalolen has one of Microsoft's first "innovation schools" and has just inaugurated a multi-purpose sports and event facility, made possible with significant fund-raising from the private sector.

¶12. (SBU) Comment: Orrego is an example of the younger generation of well-trained, globally aware, and technologically savvy Chilean politicians, many of whom have found a space in local politics. He appears to have figured out how to make public-private partnerships work on the local level, which is uncommon. His view that generational change within political party leadership is still a long way off is a message the Embassy hears with increasing frequency. End comment.